



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## THE CHEYENNE MEDICINE LODGE

By GEORGE BIRD GRINNELL

THE ceremony of the Medicine Lodge, or Sun Dance, is one of the most important religious festivals known to the Plains Indians, although certain tribes living on and near the plains do not practise it, and so far as known never have done so.

The ceremony always has been misunderstood and has been generally condemned. Its form is constantly changing; in some tribes it is being called by a new name, and the old ritual and ceremonies are being forgotten. It seems time therefore that something should be said to correct erroneous views concerning it that have long had currency.

Of the acts which formerly took place during this ceremony, the most striking had to do with the personal suffering of some of those who were present, and generally it has been believed that a part of the ceremony of the Medicine Lodge was the infliction of the so-called torture frequently endured at the time and within the inclosure where the ceremony was conducted. A generation ago it was declared that this torture—swinging to the pole and dragging buffalo skulls—was self-inflicted for the purpose of making warriors, the implication being that no man might be considered a warrior who had not endured these sufferings. Other writers have said that the suffering was undergone by young men who wished to show that their hearts were strong; in other words, that it was a test of endurance. Something of this sort Catlin implies in his account of the Medicine Lodge ceremonies, known as *O-kee-pa*, among the Mandan. These beliefs many years ago led the Government to interfere with the Medicine Lodge. The Indian agents declared that the ceremony was a producer of warriors, while the missionaries, who held every form of religion wrong except the particular one professed by each, were repelled by the spectacle of the suffering, and both agreed that the ceremony ought to be stopped. So the Indian Bureau forbade the Sun Dance in many places.

The Indian agents and the missionaries were not alone in believing the torture to be a part of the Medicine Lodge. Some ethnologists have had the same impression. In his recent interesting *Handbook of the North American Indians of the Plains*, Dr Wissler says: "The Sun Dance presents several features variously combined and distributed. These are the torture, the circular shelter of poles, the use of a sacred bundle, the erection of a sun pole, and the dancing ceremonies."

In his article on "Ceremony" in the *Handbook of American Indians*, Dr G. A. Dorsey says that the self-inflicted torture "often forms an intrinsic part of the public performance." This is a general statement, with no specific reference to the Medicine Lodge ceremony.

On the occasion of a Medicine Lodge ceremony a dozen or fifteen years ago it was reported that two students of ethnology hired a young Indian to have his back pierced and to drag about one or more beef skulls. I do not know that this ever took place, but at the time it was widely heralded and was used as an argument for stopping the dance. If this happened, the boy, like those who hired him, may have believed that he was going through a part of the Medicine Lodge ceremony, but older men would have set them right, and explained the true motive of this more or less painful proceeding.

Persons who have been much among Indians recognize the extraordinary difficulty often found in getting at the fundamental motive which lies behind any act. They recognize also the almost universal tendency among observers to credit the primitive people whom they see with the same motives and the same methods of reasoning that the observers themselves employ. Since in old times torture in some form or other often took place during and at the ceremony of the Medicine Lodge, it was natural enough that observers should take it for granted that this torture was a part of the ceremony. This was not true in the case of the Cheyenne Indians, nor, in my belief, was it ever true in the case of any plains people. The suffering of the Medicine Lodge was not for the purpose of making warriors or to show endurance, nor was it any part of the ceremony. Instead, it was, in all cases, the payment by the individual of some vow

that he had made; was a sacrifice of self to bring good fortune or to avert misfortune in the future, or else was the carrying out of some instruction received in a dream. Sometimes the motive was merely loyalty to a friend—a wish to share his suffering.

The sacrifice of the body is, I suppose, as old as religion and is confined to no sect, creed, or race. It has been universally practised as a means of invoking the favor of the powers which rule the universe. Primitive people practise it in all lands. Civilized people do the same today. The priests of Baal, when they called on their God to send down fire from Heaven to consume the sacrifice of Elijah, cut themselves with knives as they prayed to him. The Indians swing to the pole. The flagellants lashed themselves with whips, and the so-called Penitentes in the Southwest with the branches of the cactus, and endured the sufferings of crucifixion. The monk of the Middle Ages wore a hair shirt, and the woman of today fasts during Lent. All these are different expressions of the same feeling.

The ceremonial of the Medicine Lodge is a religious occasion of great importance, transmitted, the people say, through many generations. It celebrates the rebirth of life on the earth, the return of the season of growth. The Cheyenne call it "the renewing of the earth." The occasion, the time, and the place are sacred, and the ceremony is associated with certain sacrifices, the offering to the spiritual powers of acceptable gifts, accompanied by the purification which comes from the abstention from food and drink for a period of a few days.

The mysterious powers are present and receive the prayers, offerings, and sacrifices, and the occasion is one peculiarly favorable for the performance of those acts in which spiritual assistance is needed. The edifice, so called, of the Medicine Lodge is the center of these helpful influences, but they affect the whole gathering. All who are present in the camp receive a blessing in some degree. For this reason, in old times, every member of the tribe wished and was expected to be present. Messengers were sent about to every small camp to notify it of the time of the ceremony. If, as rarely happened, some man was slow in coming to the meeting place, a

band of soldiers was sent to bring him in. If he was obstinate and still delayed his coming, he was fetched by force, and harsh measures might be employed to hasten his arrival. He might be beaten with quirts, his lodge and lodge-poles destroyed, and even his horses killed.

The reason for this enforced attendance is obvious enough. Absence from the ceremony was believed to bring misfortune, and misfortune to an individual, or to a number of individuals, might well enough extend from them to other members of the tribe. Therefore, in the belief of all the people it was essential that everyone should be present to share in the blessed influence of the occasion and in the protection from evil which this influence would bring.

I have no record of any family or group of Cheyenne refusing to attend this ceremony, though it is stated that on one or two occasions the messengers have been unable to find some little camp at a distance from the principal village. I know of no case like that instanced in an earlier paper on the Cheyenne, where Big Ribs, a famous warrior—whose name is always coupled with that of Old Little Wolf, as the two bravest men ever known among the Cheyenne—resisted and drove away a group of soldiers sent to his camp to bring him to the ceremony of renewing the medicine arrows.<sup>1</sup>

Because of the presence of these favorable spirits at the ceremony, and their beneficent influence, all the food brought into the Medicine Lodge and allowed to remain there for a brief period is sanctified. Having passed through this sacred place, it is all—or almost all—taken out again and eaten by the people, not as food merely, but also for the spiritual benefit received by eating it. This belief is so firmly held that an effort is made to have everyone in the camp, from the youngest to the oldest, share in these benefits by eating of the food. A relative, for example, will take a tiny morsel of such food and will place it in the mouth of a babe too young to swallow, removing it a moment or two later, but believing that the blessing received by the food while in the Medicine Lodge will be imparted to the infant.

Among the Blackfeet a similar faith and like practice exist.

---

<sup>1</sup> *American Anthropologist*, N. S., vol. XII, p. 547.

The hundred tongues dried and prepared by the woman who vows the Medicine Lodge in that tribe are partaken of by all the people as a sacred food, the eating of which carries with it a blessing.

The sacred influence of the Medicine Lodge extends through the entire camp and lasts during the whole time of the ceremony. Any spiritual and sacred operations in which prayers are used will be more successful if undertaken or carried on at this time than if undertaken at any other time. As said of the ceremony of renewing the medicine arrows, secret medicines mixed and prepared during the days of the Medicine Lodge will be more potent than those made at other times. The making of shields—a mysterious and secret operation in which spiritual influences played a most important part—was undertaken at this time. The spiritual protective power of shields made at that time was strong. Generally this was a peculiarly favorable time for the performance of any operation in which prayers—the invoking of help from the mysterious powers—were important. In the same way it was a good time to pay vows.

A man out on the warpath and in danger might pledge himself to swing to the pole, or drag skulls, without specifying when he would do this, and in that case the time at which he would pay the vow was for him to determine, or he might vow that he would swing to the sun-dance pole, or would drag skulls during the ceremony of the Medicine Lodge. In the same way a man might pledge himself to make a feast for the horse doctors' society—horsemen—if his horse did not give out in the fight, or might promise to offer other sacrifices if successful in certain undertakings.

If no Medicine Lodge ceremony was held for two or three years after he had made the vow, the man who had promised to undergo the ordeal at the time of the Medicine Lodge postponed the payment of the vow until that ceremony was held. On the other hand, one who had promised that he would swing to the pole usually did so absolutely alone, except for the assistance of one or two men who in the past had themselves suffered in this way and whom he was obliged to ask to teach him how to perform the act in the ritual manner. He was altogether likely to make his sacrifice quietly,

among the hills at a distance from the camp, seeking no notoriety, but rather striving, so far as possible, to keep the matter quiet. He might drag buffalo skulls in the same way. Such individual sacrifices have been offered within two or three years.

Of late years, since the Government interfered with the operations of swinging to the pole or dragging skulls, and since the whole mode of life of the Indians has changed, the common form of public sacrifice in the Medicine Lodge is dancing without food or drink for three or four days, an effort which, among the modern young Indian men, often wholly unaccustomed to exercise, has led to many a physical breakdown. The dancing of old times, while gazing at the sun or the moon, even though very protracted, was more likely to bring on visions and dreams than to cause physical exhaustion.

Formerly, I am told, it was much more common for young men to go out in the hills, have their breasts pierced, and under instruction to walk back and forth for a long time in a limited circle, trying to break away from the pole, than it was for young men to endure this suffering in the Medicine Lodge. Not a few other forms of personal suffering which had no possible relation to any general religious festival were undergone to obtain the favor of the powers. One of these was to starve for a long period; another was to stand all night in water up to the shoulders.

The following detail of the operation of swinging to the pole alone in the hills was given me by *Wih'io'kis*, Little White Man, formerly called *Wikis'nis'to*, Bird That Calls (utters a cry).

He was then a young man, and his first child, a little baby, was very sick. In order to save the infant's life he determined to make a sacrifice. While considering what form this sacrifice should take, he saw in dreams persons standing up and swinging to the pole, and when at length he was convinced that this was what he was directed to do, he still hesitated for some time before making up his mind to act. Yet he kept thinking he saw a person swinging to a pole, and even when awake and moving about he used to see this. Finally another dream led him to decide. The person who appeared to him in the dream said to him that if he made this sacrifice his child would recover.

Bird That Calls now summoned two older men to advise him. These were Black Whetstone (*Mōhktā'vēhūtsē'hē*) and Wounded Eye (*Hē'ēkai'itstāhē*). He told them what he had seen, and said that he was obliged to undergo this suffering and that they must teach him how to do it. He offered them the pipe, requesting them to help him, and they accepted it, thus promising their assistance.

The afternoon before the sacrifice was to be made, Black Whetstone and Wounded Eye took Little White Man out to cut the pole to which he was to be tied. When a young cottonwood tree, suitable for a pole, was found, they grasped his arms and caused him to move his hands four times toward the tree, as if cutting it with an axe. Then he cut down the pole without further ceremony.

They now caused him to pick it up from the ground, making four motions before lifting it and then four motions before dragging it away to the place chosen for the sacrifice. When the place was reached, the instructors showed him how to dig the hole in which it was to stand, making four preliminary motions before actually beginning to dig the hole. The pole was not trimmed; the leaves and branches were left on it.

That night after the three had reached camp, a messenger was sent about the camp to find and borrow two braided rawhide riatas. Two were required because he had two instructors. If there had been a single instructor, only one rope would have been needed. Next morning the three men arose very early, and long before daylight each instructor took one of the ropes and rubbed his hands down over its whole length four times. Then a coal was taken from the fire, sweet grass sprinkled on it and each rope was passed four times through the smoke. Then to one end of each rope were tied two deerskin strings, each seven or eight inches long. Each rope was now doubled into a ball in the middle, leaving the end to which the strings were tied—to be attached to the skewers in his body—four or five feet long, and the other end—to be tied to the pole—somewhat longer. The ropes were now put aside, and thereafter no one might touch them except Bird That Calls.

Just before daylight the instructors painted him with white clay



over the whole body. After he had been painted, they caused him to sit, and filled and lighted a pipe, and offered it to him four times, and each time he smoked. The pipe was held to his mouth; he did not touch it with his hands.

After he had smoked, the instructors told him that the direction to perform this sacrifice was the greatest favor that he could have received—the privilege to stand on a hill where all (the powers) might look at him, and to stand by a pole in the sun's road where the sun could look down and see him. It might be a hard trial, but he must not give up. When the sun rose he should look at it until it reached the middle,—the zenith,—and when it passed the middle he should not give up, but should watch it until it disappeared.

After he had received this instruction, he set out with the two older men to go to the place where the pole was. He had expected to walk out there barefoot, but it chanced that among his gifts to his instructors were some moccasins, and for this reason he had the right to wear moccasins in going out. When they set out, he walked in advance, wrapped in a buffalo robe and carrying the two ropes. The instructors followed.

When they reached the place where the pole was, Bird That Calls sat down near the pole and facing it, and the instructors sat behind him and filled a pipe. Before lighting the pipe they pointed it to the four directions and prayed. They smoked and waited before setting up the pole until the sun just began to peep over the hills. While waiting the two instructors tied the two ropes to the pole, each one giving the other a small present to pay him for tying the rope.

The instructors said to him, "You must watch the sun, and before it gets up too high must raise the pole."

When the sun began to rise above the horizon, Bird That Calls planted the pole, while the instructors prayed and asked the sun to look upon this pole. "Whoever it was that directed this man to do this, let him see that now he is doing it. Let this man have good luck, and let all his children be fortunate. We have the tree standing in your gristle rope. It has never been

broken. Let this man live long—until he has crossed the four ridges.”

The four ridges alluded to represent four trials—four sacrifices to be made. It is believed that the great power will be pleased with a man who shall perform four important ceremonies. These ceremonies are the ridges referred to. One who desires to obtain special favor from the great power has these four ridges to cross; in other words, he endeavors to perform these four difficult ceremonies during his life. There is no regular order in which the four ridges are to be crossed, nor is it believed that the four ceremonies are always the same ones. A man who has made the Medicine Lodge—passing through all its mysteries—is considered to have crossed one of the four ridges. One who wishes to acquire abundant spiritual power—to qualify as a great medicine-man—may do so by passing one of the ridges each year for four years. The opinion has been expressed that a man who possessed sufficient physical endurance to stand the hardships involved in the tasks, might pass all these ridges in a single summer. The crossing of a ridge, it is believed, does not imply any particular period of time.

The braided gristle (rawhide) ropes spoken of in the prayer were commonly used to swing on by those who paid their vows in this way in the Medicine Lodge. Such ropes were used over and over again by different persons in the payment of such vows. The tree stands within the rope that is tied about it.

South of the pole, and facing southward, was placed a buffalo skull; on each side of the pole, east and west, stood two buffalo chips, each four steps and a half step (12 or 14 feet), from it, and south of each of these chips was another. These chips represented guards, or watchers, to observe the man and see that he did his duty. Buffalo chips were not always available, but if they were not to be had, large stones might be used in place of them. In the arc of a circle south of the pole—the pole being the circle's center—was spread a bed of white sage for him to walk on.

It was now time for him to be pierced. He knelt, sitting back on his heels, and rested his hands on his knees, opposite to and facing the pole. The instructors knelt at his right side and with

charcoal marked upright parallel lines on the skin on the right breast to indicate where the knife should enter and where come out. Then one instructor took the skin in his fingers above the marks and the other below the marks, and pinching up the skin they thrust in the knife at the marked place on the right, and it came through at the marked place on the other side. Before using the knife, it had been rubbed down with a piece of charcoal. The left breast was pierced in the same way, the instructors passing behind the novice, but in this case the knife was thrust into the skin of the left breast from right to left, as it had been on the right side, and not from left to right. This was done because a single knife was used for the two piercings. If two knives had been used, the second might have been inserted from left to right.

When the right breast was pierced, the instructors, assisting each other, passed a small straight stick, the length of a finger, through the slit, and to this skewer tied the strings on one of the ropes. After the left breast was pierced a similar skewer was passed through that slit and tied.

After the strings had been tied, the instructors raised Bird That Calls to his feet and supported and directed him as he walked over to the middle of the sage-covered path. Then the instructors pulled four times on his breast to straighten out the ropes. They moved his body toward the east and then toward the west; again toward the east and again toward the west—four times. Then they took hold of his right leg and moved it four times forward, and at the fourth movement he began to walk to the west end of the sage-covered trail, and from there back to its east end, and back again—going forth and back until the sun had set. It seemed to him to take the sun a long time to reach the middle, but the time from the middle to the sun's setting was much longer. He was constantly trying to break loose, but the skin of his breast did not break; it only stretched. He had the privilege of resting four times—in the middle of the forenoon, at noon, in the middle of the afternoon, and just before sunset. At each of these rests he might smoke a pipe. He rested but once—at midday.

As soon as he had begun to walk, the instructors left him and were

absent all day, intending to return to him just as the sun set. When they left him, they said, "When we return for you at sunset, try to be as near as you can to the place from which we raised you up, but do not sit down until we come to you and push you down."

During the day the instructors built a sweat-house in the camp.

At sundown, when the instructors reached him again, they grasped his arms, one on each side, and pushed him down to a sitting position. They cut through the stretched hide of his breast, took him back to camp, and entered the sweat-lodge with him, some other men who had made this sacrifice also going into it. His wounds and the blood on his body were wiped off with white sage. That night, when he ate, no one might eat with him except men who had experienced this suffering. On each of the three following days he took a sweat, and on the fourth day the ceremony was finished.

He was told that thereafter, if he wished to teach men how to undergo this penance, he might teach four persons and no more.

In taking a ceremonial sweat, the man is thought for the time being to give over his whole body and spirit to the great power. Then when he leaves the sweat-house, and his body has been wiped off with white sage—the male sagebrush (*hētānēwānūtz'*)—his body again belongs to himself.

Wík'isínis'to gave his instructors a horse, a gun, a suit of deer-skin clothing, moccasins, and blankets. His child got better the next morning.

An explanation of the considerable number of dancers who take part in the sacrifice and go through the labor and starvation at the time of the Medicine Lodge, is found in the feeling of loyalty which exists in the soldier societies. When a member of any soldier society had pledged himself to suffer at the Medicine Lodge, whether as medicine-lodge maker, or merely as a dancer, it became a point of pride with the other members of that soldier society to undertake to carry through a similar sacrifice. They felt that they must not let their brother undergo this suffering alone, and so, out of good will and friendship for him, they undertook to do as he was doing.

That the so-called torture is no part of the ceremony of the Medicine Lodge I have long known. Recently, in order to confirm

this knowledge, I made specific inquiry on the point of certain priests—men who themselves have made the medicine lodge and who time and again have acted as priests in the Medicine Lodge ceremony. I asked them to tell me definitely whether the torture—the dancing for a long period, the swinging to the pole, or the dragging of skulls—were parts of the Medicine Lodge ceremony. They seemed astonished at the question and rather disposed to think I was joking with them and to laugh at the inquiry; but when I explained my reasons for asking it, each man earnestly and positively declared that the torture had no relation whatever to the ceremony.

These forms of suffering have appealed to the imagination of people who have witnessed them, and the result has been that in the popular view the actual ceremony of the Medicine Lodge and its purpose have been very largely overlooked, while the spectacular performances of the so-called torture have been enlarged on.

The use of sacred bundles, the erection of the sun pole, the building of an altar, some sacrifices, and certain other more or less secret ceremonies are parts of the ritual of the Medicine Lodge, as they are of certain other ceremonies. Torture is no part of it and has no relation to it in any tribes with which I am familiar.

The Medicine Lodge seems only a form of the Summer Dance common to many Indian tribes, and is directly connected with the food supply—an abundance of animals, a liberal yield of natural fruits and roots, and of crops cultivated. These festivals are direct prayers for sustenance—petitions that the earth will continue to bring forth food for man and for the beasts on which man depends for food.

238 EAST FIFTEENTH STREET  
NEW YORK CITY